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A Response

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Source: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2016), pp. 148-151

Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of FSR, Inc

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.25>

Accessed: 13-02-2017 17:58 UTC

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Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion

for a hundred years then resurrecting him and having him watch as his donkey is resurrected from dust to bones to flesh (Sura 2, al-Baqara (The Cow) 2:259). When Abraham asks, “My Sustainer show me how will you revive the dead,” he is asked “do you not believe?” Abraham says, “I do, but so my heart may be convinced.” Abraham, as a person of deep faith, asks an honest question, expressing his doubt about a central tenet of faith. He is rewarded by not only being shown but also being taught how to revive the dead (al-Baqara 2:260). Muslim feminists need to ask, “My Sustainer, show us how are we to deliver justice—to women, to sexual minorities, to nonhuman animals and to this earth?” and expect to be rewarded beyond our imagination in our efforts to bear witness for justice as our faith imperative.

YaSiin Rahmaan received a doctorate in religion in the United States and currently teaches in a graduate program. Rahmaan’s research and teaching interests focus on bringing together traditional Muslim and contemporary Western approaches to Qur’anic studies to open up possibilities for new readings regarding issues of gender, sexuality, and animal rights.

A RESPONSE

Asma Barlas

I appreciate this opportunity to respond to the criticisms of my essay and will focus on two sets of shared concerns about what made it possible and prompted its “theological scrutiny” of my interlocutors.

Hidayatullah asks “What *kind* of response is Asma Barlas’s? . . . How is a reading like hers made possible? [and] . . . Is it possible to disagree theologically in a manner that builds and edifies?” (135). She clarifies that her false theological paradox—pitting God’s speech and justice against each other—results from “treating the Qur’an as a repository of norms” (137). When we do this, she argues, “we present the text as saying things *for* us . . . instead of claiming the human authority to privilege some meanings of the Qur’an over others when the text does not offer clear support for doing so” (137). This is why, she says, feminists need to “reassess the revelatory nature of the text in a manner that allows for interpretive roles beyond extraction” (137). Ali says I misquoted her (regrettably, I *did* mistake her use of the phrase “divine oversight”); that “theological preoccupations are foremost” in my mind, and that, “rather than engage in sustained exegetical debate, Barlas resorts to theological scrutiny, questioning the religious bona fides of those with whom she disagrees”

(122). She decries this “ugly tactic” and wonders why “deference to a specific idea of the Qur’an’s authority” is “the criterion of ‘observant’ Muslimness” for me.^{*} Karen Bauer is outraged that I think Muslims don’t question “whether the Qur’an is the word of God” (128); that I name and shame scholars “(in a public forum), because they question the sacrality of the Qur’an by treating the Qur’an as a discourse,” and that I maintain “that, because they are Muslim, they should not read the Qur’anic text in accordance with commonly accepted scholarly norms” (her words, 129). Finally, Fatima Seedat thinks that my “accusations of an anti-Qur’anic turn limit the forms of divinity available to the text to the degree to which the definitive text can tell us what God says” (142).

Let me first say what made my essay possible. Simply put, it is the fact that the scholars whom I critiqued ignore “commonly accepted scholarly norms” in the field of hermeneutics and also discount the Islamic belief that the Qur’an is the *verbatim* word of God. I illustrated this by showing that they (1) dismiss “feminist exegesis” as dishonest, futile, manipulative, and so on while also rejecting its methods of reading “behind” and “before” the text; (2) use *this very exegesis* to then claim that the Qur’an is patriarchal/androcentric and cannot deliver “feminist justice”; (3) take this claim as the basis for (a) declaring the Qur’an closed to liberatory readings and then (b) disputing its sacrality (calling it a “part human” discourse or questioning if it is God’s word); and (4) urge Muslims to stop treating it as sacred or appealing to it. I contested the validity of each claim and also tried to show that they don’t follow logically from one another. More to the point, I drew attention to the fact that Muslims cannot embrace (3), (b), and (4) because they take the Qur’an to be God’s word. This is why I ventured to suggest that, in the end, how we read it—as being or not being *God’s word*—has to do with faith and faith is personal.

I did not argue that faith alone yields better interpretations. After all, Muslims have a 1,400-year-long history of reading it as a patriarchal text, and I do take issue with the readings. (I reiterate my surprise that feminists who claim to want to read the Qur’an differently then choose to bandy about its “hierarchy verses” as a way to assert its patriarchalism, a classic *petitio principii*.¹) However, if faith alone does not yield better readings, it does not impede them either. In fact, reading the Qur’an as God’s word, which reflects God’s being, can encourage us to read it for its best meanings or, at the very least, keep us from proposing false theological paradoxes. I should also note that reading it from a faith-based perspective doesn’t mean passively and mechanistically “extracting” norms from it. Fourteen centuries of a rich and complex exegetical history attest that

^{*}Editors’ note: This quotation refers to a sentence that appeared in an earlier version of Kecia Ali’s response to Asma Barlas. The editors take full responsibility for the error that resulted in this discrepancy.

¹ I’m grateful to David Finn for this and some other points; Finn, e-mail to author, March 9, 2016.

Muslims have used a variety of interpretive strategies, and I consider “feminist exegesis” to be part of this tradition even if it remains marginal. Hidayatullah, however, excoriates it in her book for privileging some (egalitarian) meanings of the Qur’an over others (patriarchal ones) on the grounds that there is no clear textual support for doing so. Now, in her response, she says this is *exactly what she wants to do* by reassessing the text’s “revelatory nature.” She explains that whereas “Barlas seems to view the problem of deriving unjust meanings from the Qur’an as well as its solution as *hermeneutical*, I understand both to be primarily *theological*” (137). In other words, she considers “interpretive contradictions . . . to be symptoms of a problem with how we understand what kind of revelatory text the Qur’an is . . . since the problem is theological, so must its solution be theological” (137). This is basically a rephrasing of Abu Zayd’s position and my response to it is that interpretive conflicts are symptomatic not of the Qur’an’s sacrality, or of *who* its author is, or with what *kind* of a revelatory text it is, but of our own interpretive *methods*. In absolutely no circumstances have Muslim theologians or scholars of Islam—until now—sought to end interpretive conflicts by disavowing the sanctity of the Qur’an. It was, therefore, this novel “theological solution” of wanting to “reassess” its “revelatory nature” that occasioned my “theological scrutiny” of the scholars who proposed it.

Again, to put it simply, asserting that there is or may be no connection between God and God’s speech, or that the Qur’an is not God (!), or that it is a “part human” discourse, or that God may be infallible but the Qur’an is not, or that belief in God’s word doesn’t commit us to accepting its content as sacred or binding, is not theology—rather it is an *antitheology*. No branch of Islamic theology questions “whether the Qur’an is the word of God,” not even those early theologians who debated its (un)createdness. Though Hidayatullah gestures to them as a way to explain her own stance on the Qur’an,² what they were debating wasn’t whether or not the Qur’an is God’s speech (its sacrality), but whether God and God’s speech are coextensive (issues of causality and temporality). In this context, what “forms of divinity” can be “available to the text” other than its status as God’s word? Since God is one and the Qur’an is God’s word, divinity is indivisible and there is no way to talk oneself out of this Islamic tenet, at least from within an Islamic framework. This is why disputing the Qur’an’s status puts one outside the pale of Islam, an “outside” *Islamic theology* calls heresy and blasphemy. Pointing out facts that I thought Muslims *knew* neither makes me pious nor is tantamount to claiming the sacred or to espousing an idiosyncratic view of “‘observant’ Muslimness” or “a specific idea of the Qur’an’s authority” (actually, I focus on its theological status). To note the obvious, I could only critique these scholars because they published their views.

² Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 173.

What exists between some of my interlocutors and myself, therefore, isn't a trivial gap in our approach to the Qur'an on which we can "theologically disagree" like good liberals. What exists is a completely opposed understanding of Islam, to say nothing of Islamic theology and hermeneutics. This doesn't mean, however, there are no areas of agreement among any of us. For instance, like Seedat, I also consider it more appropriate to view the Qur'an "as a continuous and discursive becoming" (142) rather than a text whose meanings we have fixed or exhausted for all eternity. However, some meanings cannot be "rethought" because they have to do with convictional beliefs, such as there is one God and the Qur'an is God's word. Furthermore, there is a radical difference between taking a "discursive approach" to the Qur'an and calling it, as Abu Zayd and Rhouni do, a "part-human discourse." Then, too, I also want Muslim women to be able to claim "exegetical authority," though I do not believe their experiences allow them, or anyone else, to upturn Islamic beliefs or to tell Muslims—who else?—to stop appealing to our scripture. For believers, the Qur'an is not an empty sacred relic, it is an enduring lifeline to the sacred, and the possibilities of living a moral life are intimately tied to our understanding of and relationship to it. This is why we go on struggling *with* it in the liminal spaces between the parameters it delineates for believers and the seemingly limitless freedom that is the promise of secularism.